Corey Brown

Sunrise over Misrata

I shot out of bed. Once again I was rudely awoken by the terrible roar of the rockets and missiles as Gaddafi’s forces began their morning ritual of bombarding Misrata on the western front. I thought that, by now, I’d be used to this, and I have adjusted to life under siege, but how can you get used to destruction, fear, and suffering? Glancing at the clock, it appeared that my daily missile alarm clock was running a bit slow and, considering that I was late already, I lay in bed pondering my predicament. As I lay there, at peace in my sanctuary of pillows, blankets, and a homemade quilt, I happened to gaze upon a picture hanging on the wall. It was nothing special, just a small photo of my family, but it seemed hard to remember a time where we were all happy and safe, chatting and laughing, together. How did we fall so far? It seemed only yesterday, but also many lifetimes ago, that my brother and I went on our first fishing trip in our father’s boat. He taught us his business so that one day, when he was too old to work, we could inherit and run it, together. But now he’s gone, lost, taken by Gaddafi’s efforts to stop the rebels. With Ashraf dead, and friends and family in short supply, our once beautiful home has turned into a silent pit of despair…

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It is amazing how gloomy flowery wallpaper can be, though I suppose that’s more a reflection of myself than the pattern. My father was out at our market stand, though I hardly see the point in keeping it open nowadays. We’re running low on fish to sell, but that doesn’t stop him. Bemused, I made my way out of the house –

“Watch it Sadiq!” Exclaimed Zeba, my sister. “You almost made me drop my necklace; you know what that means to me.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t paying attention…” I replied distractedly.

Truth to be told, I thought it was the ugliest piece of jewelry that I ever had the misfortune to lay eyes upon, but she adored it. It was a cheap little thing, but it was clear to all of us that she must have gotten it from one of the rebel fighters. I often teased her about it, but right now, I didn’t have the time. I had to leave for my job: clearing the streets of debris, helping displaced families, and aiding the wounded. I dealt so many wounded, mainly civilians. The hospitals couldn’t cope and had to expand into the parking lot in which I now worked. It was rough work, but it was my way of supporting my city without supporting the rebels. While I agree that Gaddafi should be ousted, I’m not sure the rebels can accomplish that. And their actions have brought suffering upon the entire city.

My father disagrees with my position. Every day, when I return home, I get the same stare. This simple gesture contains more meaning than words ever could. *You should be fighting on the front lines. That’s what your brother would have done*. Sometimes, I come home to that stare after seeing innocent civilians die and I even see just the slightest hint of *why couldn’t you have died instead?* At times like these, I snap back at him, daring him to say his thoughts aloud, to confirm my suspicions, but he just sits there, coldly hiding behind his newspaper, my shouts joining a chorus of others, blending into indistinguishable static to his tired ears.

As the days pass, my once thriving relationship with my father is falling to pieces. Our treasured memories become haunting reminders of our differences and struggles. We avoid each other as much as possible and speak to each other only when necessary. Zeba is our only bridge; she tries, in vain, to connect us together through conversation, to no avail. My father conveys the news of the conflict to her, then she to me. I grew closer than ever to her then. She began to fill the void which my brother left in my heart. She knew how to console me, and I felt I could open my soul to her.

“Good evening!” She would say every night as I came home the exact moment I stepped through the door. She always had some tasty treat to tide me over until dinner waiting for me when I came home along with some new flower or another in the vase in the window with the curtains drawn wide open. It was the highlight of my day. She was always there to support me, so when she wanted me, I was happy to be of assistance.

Father was going to be late that evening, he was finally closing down that absurd shop, and so our daily news was to be late. Well, Zeba just would not have it. We marched right down the center of town, following Tripoli Street until we came upon the gathering we were looking for.

A cacophony of voices cried out continuously as worried family members bombarded the man in the center of the crowd with questions:

“Is my son alive?” exclaimed one mother. “You knew him; he worked at your store.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” exclaimed another, more rational parent. “We’re sorry for you loss, but how can you hope for his survival when you haven’t heard from him in weeks! Everyone’s got someone in the battle. It’s okay for you, you’ve got two other sons and a daughter, Aamir is my only child! Have you any news of him?”

I knew why my sister had come here; she was looking for news of the soldier who gave the necklace. I wasn’t able to get through the jostling crowd, but my sister was persistent in her efforts and finally squeezed through. Upon her return, I inquired about the news of the day.

“So, what’s the latest?” I said casually.

“Oh, not much, the fighters are pretty much in a stalemate, but the recent NATO airstrikes have helped,” she replied. “NATO forces agreed to help the rebels by bombing Gaddafi’s tanks and military bases.”

“And that’s all, is it?”

“All I can remember, yes. I may have forgotten some things; my memory isn’t the best…”

“Or maybe you were too busy worrying about other things…or people?” I suggested, grinning.

“What are you getting at?” She exclaimed, taken aback.   
“Oh come now, you think I didn’t notice? Who is this mysterious soldier fellow?”

“Well, if you must know, he had asked to marry me, but I had to ask permission from father first. However, when he went off to fight, the proposal seemed ill-timed. We both agreed to renew our relationship upon his safe return. He gave me this necklace.” She replied, lost in a haze of memories. Her facial features relaxed as she soaked up the happiness of those days, now long gone.

“Yes, I figured that much out myself… So, what news have you heard of him?” I encouraged, snapping her out of it.

“Oh, he’s fine. Still fighting. I hope he will return soon and this fighting will end…” Her brow furrowed, though, as she spoke, and I assumed that she had begun to realize the possible outcomes if the fighting continued to persist.

“That was descriptive…” I sarcastically commented.

She smiled, but it never quite reached her eyes. She was still so very far away. I noticed that her shoulders were slouched and her gaze never quite met mine. I figured that there was something amiss, but I decided not to press the matter.

“Well, if you ever feel you need me, just ask,” I said in an effort to reciprocate some of the support she had always offered me.

I felt closer to her than ever and, though there was desolation around us, she lifted my spirits and made this awful time bearable…

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My sister’s excited voice broke the spell, and all of the recollections, good and bad, vanished. After about a minute, I realized once again that my ‘alarm’ had failed to wake me at the usual time and I was going to me late. I jumped out of bed, pulled out some clothes and put them on as fast as I could. I ran to the bathroom only to find that I had put them on backwards. After hastily fixing my mistake, I rushed downstairs, gobbled down a quick breakfast and ran to meet my sister outside.

This journey to hear the week’s news became a tradition for the two of us. We would meet up and head down to hear the news of the fighting, her fiancé in particular. Our timing was better in subsequent visits and we were both able to hear the news, but today, it appeared we missed the window. It was as busy as it had been on our first excursion, so my sister employed the same maneuver and once again gained access. This time, however, she did not return. I waited for a while, asking people if they’d seen her, but as time passed, less people had. Soon, the flow of newcomers halted and I was finally able to find a path through to the center. I asked the man who brought the news, but he was no use. I figured that Zeba must have returned home after she spoke with him and couldn’t find me.

As I approached the house, my fears were allayed as I thought I could see her busy in the kitchen through the closed curtains. As I approached the door, her shadowy figure gracefully moved to greet me. I was ready to feign surprise and disappointment in her actions as soon as I stepped through the door.

“Where have you been?” My mother exclaimed furiously as she wrenched open the door.

My surprise need not have been faked. Where was my sister’s customary greeting? My already racing heart beat ever faster, amplified by my mother’s next question.

“Where’s Zeba?”

There was no way out now, it was clear that she had run off. I had been foolishly optimistic that she would just leave me and return home. I should have realized that, upon receiving news of her loved one’s death, she might run off in a fit of uncontrolled emotion. I hoped still that she would return home, but I looked for her all the same.

The evening passed in silence as we all waited, anticipating her return. The conflict between my father and I lessened. We made temporary peace for my sister’s sake. However, as morning came, we could wait no longer.

The fiercely hot sun glowed orange, a light rising over the rebel capitol in Benghazi bringing hope to those in Misrata that perhaps they might gain a similar safety. To me however, it was simply functional as I was once again able to renew my search. As the morning turned to afternoon and the sweltering heat of the mid-day sun sunk in, I began to lose hope. I was making my way slowly back home, my feet dragging across the arid ground, when I was blinded by a shining light reflecting off something on the ground. I came closer and found that the item in question was my sister’s necklace! The cheap gem was reflecting the light into my eyes, drawing me in. There was no question, it was hers. And next to it lay a bed of trampled weeds. Their flower petals scattered and stems squashed. Their destruction would have appalled Zeba, but more importantly, it was clear that someone attacked her here and she was taken away.

My head hung low as I eased the door open. I probably needn’t have said anything, my parents could’ve deciphered the truth from my face alone, but they needed to hear it anyways.

“Zeba’s…gone…” I said, my voice barely rising above a whisper.

My parents were in denial, at first, but when I showed them her necklace, the truth sunk in. We all sat for an eternity, silent tears of sorrow streaming freely down our mournful faces. There were no words to describe our terrible sadness, so none were spoken. The silent night stretched on and on, dawn could never arrive soon enough, but when it did it mocked our loss. Its brilliant light not the slightest bit diminished by our tears. But with new light, came new troubles.

Father slowly trudged down the stairs, his feet dragging on the carpeted steps. When he saw me, however, he broke his silent vigil.

“How could you let her out of you sight?” He yelled, enraged. His anger at her loss taken out on me, the only one he could blame.

“I couldn’t have stopped this,” I defended weakly, hot tears flowing once more down my tear-streaked face.

“You could’ve TRIED!” He screamed before storming off to wallow in his pit of grief and despair.

That night, I decided that I had had enough. I couldn’t take it, so I decided to join the rebel cause. I wrote a note to my family and packed my things, taking only those that meant the most to me: the basics, a picture of my happy family and, most importantly, Zeba’s necklace.

As I snuck out of the house, I realized that I didn’t know where I was going. I figured that the best place to find a rebel official was at the port being that it’s now the only way out for refugees and the only way in for supplies. Rockets still screamed even at this late hour, one every few minutes.

I fell flat on my face as an unguided missile joined one of many that hit the vital port found its way to a building near me. A strong arm pulled me up from the dust. Disoriented, I hardly knew where the mysterious man was taking me, but I was glad for his help.

“—loo. Hello? Hello? Can you hear me?” The mysterious man’s words were the first things I heard once the ringing stopped.

“Yes.” I shouted, still shaky and disoriented.

As I began to recover, the strange man began to tell stories to pass the time. I wasn’t paying very good attention, who could blame me, but they were interesting none the less. He mentioned a visit from Ali Tarhoun. Apparently, the day he left, the building in which he stayed was destroyed. It seemed odd, and my mind began to wander, but I regained my focus enough to engage in his stories once more.

“…it seemed as though only about half of the wounded civilians had been injured by bomb blasts, but the others had instead been hit by targeted sniper shots! You’d think that they were trying to kill off the innocent!” the bearded man rambled.

“ugg… My ears,” I groggily complained.

“Ah! You’re with us. Glad to see you up again,” the cheerful soldier replied.

“Why are you so unkempt?” I asked, rather rudely I suppose.

“What? Oh, you mean the beard! Ah! We promised not to shave until Gaddafi’s regime had ended. We just didn’t think it would take this long.” He said jokingly.

I laughed at that and introduced myself.

“Salam, Sadiq. My name’s Yameen,” he replied enthusiastically. “So, what are you doing out here at this time of night?”

“Looking to join the rebel forces,” I answered.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place! Come morning and we’ll have you out on the front lines.”

“What, without training?” I inquired, shocked.

“Well, I’ll give you some advice from someone who’s been fighting since the beginning: don’t expect help from NATO or anywhere else in the western world, their efforts are taking too long, we’re on our own, relatively speaking.”

“But I thought that NATO was helping…”

“Well, for a time it was, but their usefulness has run its course. They only serve as a lull between bombardments of our city which lies in ruins, a tribute to Gaddafi’s regime. We have little hope that our resistance can survive much more of this. But we are always persistent, because we know that, if we are defeated and captured, we have no hope of being treated as prisoners of war. This keeps us going, every day, every hour, we will never surrender because we can die either way, but there is only one way for us to live. So, do you still want to join our fight for freedom?”

Overwhelmed, I replied, “Well, I see no other choice.”

“Then we must begin. I can give you minimal advice and training now, but then you’re on your own.”

“Then let’s get packing!” I replied, my enthusiasm returning, though diminished.

Yameen showed me some basic military skills, updated me on the current status of the battle, and gave me some insider knowledge. He told me how Gaddafi’s troops hide from the air strikes by using civilian vehicles and staying near the cities. It was important for me to know what to do when I arrived, so we went over that too. It all passed by in a blur as the excitement and nerves began to take over. As dawn crept into the sky from the free east, we headed out to the west to join the fight.

The road out of Misrata was littered with the bodies of Gaddafi’s soldiers and some of their tanks still lie in ruin in the outskirts. The noise of the fighting grew ever louder as we approached; the raw power of it all was overwhelming.

As soon as I got off the transport, a gun was shoved into my hands. This simple action made me realize that I’d be killing people, Libyan people and I couldn’t do it. As I fell, about to burst into tears, a box dropped from my pocket into the sand. As it fell through the air, it opened and Zeba’s blue necklace was revealed. The jewel lay face up in the sand, reflecting a brilliant blue light onto my face. The gem, brighter than it had ever been before, reminded me of why I was here, reminded me that the people that I was killing were the people who kidnapped my sister, and most importantly, steeled my courage.

The vicious shouts of the men as they fired joined the wounded in a song that filled the air, accompanied by the whine of missiles and the bangs of gunfire. The cruel melody filled the air, surrounding the battlefield and encompassing the fight. I joined this chorus of violence, firing my weapon for the first time, killing for the first time, and not feeling any sorrow. My heart was hardened to the brutality of the deaths around me, deaths that I helped cause.

Many battles passed this way, the same rage, the same fire, the same result. Always more death, more destruction, and no victory. These battles strengthened the bond between Yameen and I. We fought side-by-side, looking out for each other. Death surrounded us, but we had no choice but to push onwards.

I woke up to find that the fighting had already begun. Sand covered my clothes and seeped under them from nights in the desert. I was weary, but ready for action. I looked for Yameen, but couldn’t find him. I went out alone for the first time, still looking for my friend. By the end of that day I had still not seen him. On my way back from the front line, I came across a man, lying face-down in the sand, seriously wounded.

A groan escaped through his dying lips and I rushed to help him.

“Yameen!” I gasped in disbelief. “No, no, no, it can’t be. You’ll be fine. I’ll get help. They’ll fix you right up! Come on Yameen, you can do this. Please… Please… No… Don’t do this to me. Not now… Please, don’t…”

Tears welled in my eyes as he patted the jewelry box in my pocket and, with his final breath, sighed, “For Zeba…”

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After more than seventy days, the siege of Misrata was over, I was heading home! I began to realize that I’d have to face my parents again. I wondered how they’d taken to my absence. I held tight to Zeba’s necklace for support as I walked slowly down the streets passing too many homes destroyed by the bombardments. Many people gathered the shells of the missiles and bullets, setting up table-top tributes to what they survived. Already, people had begun to make an effort to get the city going again. Civilians were out on the streets, cleaning the bodies and debris. And in little pockets, daily life was resuming, shops opening, people buying, and most importantly, smiling.

My house still stood, tall as ever, but I worried what I might find within. I couldn’t see much of the house, though the curtains were open, but in the front window a beautiful blue flower in a vase was proudly displayed. Shaking, I approached the door only to have it swung completely open. My momentum carried me forward, falling into the arms to the last person on Earth that I expected to see.

Zeba’s watery blue eyes formed two waterfalls of tears as she greeted me once more. I too could not help myself, and cried with joy. The commotion attracted my parents’ attention, and they too joined in our elation. Our tears prevented any conversation for a while, our hugs and loving stares meant more than enough. Even my father seemed to have reconciled with his feelings toward me.

“Zeba, what happened to you?” I finally managed to choke out. “All that time ago, what happened?”

“Not now… Not now…” my father interjected. That’s a story for another time. For now, let’s celebrate the reunion of our beloved family.”

This worried me, but soon drinks and good food distracted me as I rejoiced in the pleasure of seeing my family, happy, once more. However, as our revelry died down, I inquired again and this time Zeba obliged.

“I was taken by Gaddafi’s troops. I was helpless against my kidnappers, and they raped me…”

She broke down into sobs and couldn’t continue, the vile memories proving too much to bear.

“I understand. It’s okay. You don’t have to share if you don’t want to.” I said in an effort to console her.

“She returned to us the day after you left,” father said, picking up the narrative. “We’ve been waiting for *you* ever since.”

I was shocked. Not only had Gaddafi’s troops used rape as a weapon against my sister, but she returned the day after I left to fight due to her disappearance! Then, I realized the severity of the situation. The shame she must have felt. How could she face the rest of the city?

“I hope you know that you needn’t worry about us,” I tried to assure her. “We can deal with the public shame caused your unfortunate situation.”

“No, there isn’t,” She replied, her face regaining some of its composure. “One of the rebels has asked me to marry him. He is so kind. He wishes to remove the shame from our family. See, here is our ring.”

The tiny blue gem sparkled in the light. The small band of metal around her finger was the greatest comfort of all. I knew she was happy, though scarred. We rejoiced together in her happiness, but took time to remember those we had lost. Our family was back together, but still incomplete. My brother, Ashraf, was gone. Yameen, my trusted friend, perished along with so many other young men. As the bright morning sun streamed through the window, it illuminated hopes of a better tomorrow. The room filled with orange light as the sun began to rise on a brand new age of a free, but uncertain future.